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ABSTRACT

College choice is a critical decision facing many high school students. Although some research has examined where students go for help in making college choices, few studies have examined how race or gender differences of the students or differences in their standardized test scores affect their information sources. Entering college freshmen (N=3,708) indicated which of nine information sources (college students, friends, high school counselor, college publication, family, alumni, high school teacher, newspaper, television) they used in selecting a college. Responses were analyzed separately for females and males, blacks and whites, in each of four American College Testing (ACT) score categories. The results indicated that, for both sexes, the most frequently identified resources were college students, friends, and high school counselors. The counselor was identified as a resource more often than were parents or high school teachers. Blacks were more likely than whites to use counselors and less likely to use their family for college information. Students with lower ACT scores were more likely to use counselors as information sources than were students with higher scores. Friends were also a more frequent information source for low ability tested students. These findings identify the high school counselor as a critical resource in the college selection process for minority and low ability tested students. (Author/NB)

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INFORMATION SOURCES USED BY HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 3,708 entering freshmen asking them which of nine sources of information they used in selecting a college were analyzed separately for females and males, blacks and whites, in each of four ACT score categories. For both males and females, the most frequently identified resources were college students, friends, and high school counselors. The counselor was identified as a resource more often than parents or high school teachers. With regard to race, blacks were more apt than whites to use the high school counselor and less likely to use their family for college information. Grouped by ability level, students with lower ACT scores were more likely to use counselors than students with higher ACT scores as a source of college information. Friends were also a more frequent source of information for low ability tested students. In summary, these data point to the high school counselor as a critical point in the college awareness information selection choice process for minority as well as low tested ability students.

INFORMATION SOURCES USED BY HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS IN CHOOSING A COLLEGE

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College choice, now as in years past, is a critical decision facing many high school students. As they face this decision, what information sources do they most frequently use?

From mass media reports we might well conclude that high school seniors would rely primarily upon friends and peers, rather than parents, counselors, and teachers when considering such a decision. Past studies have seldom found that identify friends, peers, or fellow students were a primary source of help or information.

To whom, then, do high school students turn when seeking information concerning college? Two recent studies reported that approximately three-fourths of the students used their high school counselor as a source of information (Change, 1986; Hutchinson & Bottorff, 1986). However, the latter study found that only 59 per cent received the information they sought. More than 80 per cent of the college admissions officers believe that counselors are influential in helping a student choose a college (Dominick, et al., 1980).

And how does this influence compare with that of parents? Results, as reported in previous studies, vary. A recent study found that the influence of counselors upon college choice remained somewhat constant across the four years of high school and exceeded that of any other source. Parents, although ranked second during all four years, were of decreasing influence each year, while relatives/friends were

of increasing influence. Among seniors, counselors were ranked as the primary influence by 58 per cent of the students, relatives/peers by 12 per cent, and parents by 23 per cent (Wells & Ritter, 1979). An earlier study reported that parents were the most important influence, counselors second, and fellow students third (Tillery, 1973).

Few previous studies have examined differences between males and females as to those in their environment that they found helpful, although one reported that among 29,000 students surveyed counselors and mothers were most helpful to females, counselors and fathers were most helpful to males, with teachers and peers reported to be considerably less helpful (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). Likewise, few studies have focused upon the differences in information sources used by Blacks and Whites, or among high and low scorers on a standardized examination such as the ACT. The study reported here examines each of these contrasts.

METHOD

A questionnaire was used to survey 3708 entering freshmen (2081 females and 1627 males) who responded to a request to fill out a questionnaire during freshman orientation in the summer of 1985 concerning their college choice decision-making process. This response represented 55 per cent of the freshman class. A comparison of the sample and the population data for this class from university records revealed no significant differences between the sample and the population of entering freshmen at this institution on sex, race, or academic major.

Students were asked to print their names and student numbers on the questionnaire so that responses could be compared across several variables on the three pages of the questionnaire. Only summary data

were made available for analysis. Individual student information was held confidential.

The questionnaire asked for five kinds of information as part of a larger research project. This study drew upon the section of the instrument listing a series of college information sources (e. g., family, counselor, friends) and asking students to indicate which of these they used in considering a college.

The summary data for this research report came from both these data and student records maintained by the university admissions office, enabling the data to be analyzed separately for females and males, for Blacks and Whites, and each of four ACT score categories.

RESULTS

What resources do students use when exploring college choices? Students in this study were asked to indicate which of nine sources of information they used in selecting a college. The per cent of the sample reporting use of each of the sources is shown for males and females in TABLE I. For both males and females the most frequently identified resources were college students, friends, and high school counselors. Nearly seventy per cent of the students surveyed said that they used these people as resources. The counselor was identified as a resource more often than parents or high school teachers. Mass media provided information to less than one in five of these students.

These same data were analyzed by race, as shown in TABLE II. Blacks were more apt than Whites to use the high school counselor and less likely to use their family for college information. For Blacks, the counselor was the most frequent source of information, while whites relied most heavily upon college students.

The use of various college information sources by students in various ACT score ranges is shown in TABLE III. The rankings of the various information sources by use was approximately the same regardless of ACT score. These data indicate greater use of counselors by students with lower ACT scores and less by students with high scores. Seventy-six per cent of the students with ACT scores between 0 and 15 used a high school counselor for college information, compared with 68 per cent of the students with scores between 26 and 36. Friends also were a more frequent information source for those with low scores. High ACT score students were slightly more apt to use college publications and alumni as information sources.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study confirm the trend of previous studies in reporting that approximately 75 per cent of the respondents reported the counselor was a primary source of help. This study extends previous findings to include fairly similar results for females and males, Blacks and Whites, and those in four ACT score ranges.

Of the nine leading information sources used by students, information gained from college students, friends, and the high school counselor were the three sources most frequently reported by all sub-groups studied -- females and males, Blacks and Whites, and students in each of the four ACT score categories. School counselors were the information source most frequently used by Blacks, while college students were the most frequently reported source by males, females, Whites, and the four ACT score categories.

Most previous studies were conducted with high school students as participants. The present study contains data of entering freshmen

who were on campus and enrolled prior to participation. Whether or not this had an effect upon response is problematic, but differences are noted that might result from their status as college students. For example, participants in this study reported that their friends were more frequently used as information sources than had been reported previously. Parents were less frequently cited. Previous studies had included friend/peer as a source of information, but not college student. The high frequency of report for college student as an informational source suggests that "college student" should be included in future studies of college choice information sources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Several important implications for school counselors can be noted from the study results. First, much has been written concerning the development of the adolescent peer culture. Previous studies have found that parents are much more frequently used as information sources than are friends/peers. This study suggests that peers are much more frequented used than parents. If so, counselors may want to consider the use of group counseling activities to enhance this source and let several students gain and discuss information simultaneously. Second, the frequent use of college students as an information source suggests that counselors might facilitate information flow by inviting college students to meet with individuals and small groups to discuss the college choice process. Finally, results of this study indicate that counselors may well be a more important information source for Black than White students, and low-SAT scorers as opposed to high-scorers. Special ways of extending service to these sub-groups may be needed during this crucial period of decision-making.

Results of this study suggest that more similarities than

differences exist among the various sub-groups studied. Counselors, by being aware of the differences between groups and between this and previous studies, can provide more focused service to students in their information-seeking activity prior to selecting a college to attend.

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TABLE I
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE

INFORMATION SOURCE	FEMALE (N=2081)	MALE (N=1627)	TOTAL (N=3708)
College Students	80%	72%	77%
Friends	73	69	72
HS Counselor	73	67	70
College Publication	64	58	61
Family	62	59	61
Alumni	56	51	54
HS Teacher	54	50	52
Newspaper	21	17	19
TV	11	12	11

TABLE II
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE
BY RACE OR ETHNIC ORIGIN

INFORMATION SOURCE	WHITE (N=3324)	BLACK (N=245)
College Students	78%	68%
Friends	72	70
HS Counselor	70	78
College Publication	61	67
Family	62	47
Alumni	55	46
HS Teacher	52	59
Newspaper	19	28
TV	11	17

TABLE III
PER CENT USING EACH COLLEGE INFORMATION SOURCE
BY ACT SCORES

	ACT SCORES			
INFORMATION SOURCE	0-15 (N=171)	16-20 (N=821)	21-25 (N=1593)	26-36 (N=919)
College Students	75%	84%	78%	74%
Friends	78	74	75	68
HS Counselor	76	72	72	68
College Publication	56	55	61	67
Family	60	62	60	62
Alumni	46	54	53	59
HS Teacher	56	53	53	52
Newspaper	29	19	20	17
TV	18	13	12	8